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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000184

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SUBJECT: LHASA MONKS DESCRIBE CURRENT RELIGIOUS CLIMATE

REF: CHENGDU 183

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to Buddhist monks and Tibetans at religious centers in Lhasa visited by ConGenOff in late August, many monks remain in detention, and security officials continue to monitor closely and restrict the activities of monasteries. The 150 monks of the Jokhang Temple, Tibetan Buddhism's most holy site, have not been permitted to visit other monasteries since March. The famed Sera Monastery, one of the most important centers of the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa adherents, appears almost deserted. One layman at Sera Monastery went on at length about the arrests that have occurred. The sixty monks of Kundeling Monastery near the Potala Palace remain confined to their monastery. Complaints of widespread beatings of detainees came up frequently in conversations with ethnic Tibetans. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) From August 25-30, Consulate personnel were permitted by Chinese authorities to visit the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) for the first time since the March outbreak of unrest. As noted in reftel, ConGenOff broke away whenever possible from the official schedule to walk around areas of the city and engage in impromptu conversations with residents.

Jokhang Temple

¶3. (C) ConGenOff visited the Jokhang Temple in central Lhasa, Tibetan Buddhism's most holy site, one morning just when the temple opened at eight o'clock. Most of the other visitors appeared to be Tibetan pilgrims. On the second floor of the temple, ConGenOff met a monk sitting to one side as pilgrims filed by the chapels. When the monk began speaking with ConGenOff in Tibetan and English, a man who appeared to be an ethnic Tibetan approached, listened for a few minutes, and then walked away. The monk, in his mid-twenties, told ConGenOff he has been studying English for several years at the Jokhang and that "all the monks here study English." He described how the temple's 150 monks have been prohibited from visiting other monasteries since March. After a few minutes, a second monk approached and said something quietly to the young monk. The young monk then urged ConGenOff to leave since, "they are looking for the soldiers now." ConGenOff left and was not interfered with while departing the temple.

Sera Monastery

¶4. (C) Taking advantage of a lengthy gap between official meetings one day, ConGenOff got into a cab for the ten-minute ride from downtown Lhasa to Sera Monastery, which lies on a hillside on the northern outskirts of the city. Sera Monastery is one of the principal monasteries of the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism. After getting into the cab and asking the driver in Chinese to take him to Sera Monastery, the taxicab driver responded in Chinese "Look, I'm not Chinese, I'm Tibetan. Can you speak Tibetan?" ConGenOff responded in Tibetan, and the driver began discussing the "fight between Chinese and Tibetans," adding that in March he hid at home. The driver said many monks were arrested and beaten, including many from Sera Monastery.

¶5. (C) During ConGenOff's two-hour stay at Sera, the monastery appeared quiet and almost deserted, except for some Tibetan pilgrims and a few foreign tourists. Only once did ConGenOff encounter a group of monks. The group was composed of ten monks, all of whom appeared to be in their early twenties, marching (somewhat uncharacteristically for monks) two-by-two in a column. (Note: Per reftel, there are widespread rumors in Lhasa of security agents masquerading as monks.)

¶6. (C) An ethnic Tibetan layman whom ConGenOff ran into on the monastery grounds poured out his frustration and anger about the post-March security crackdown and the increasing number of Han Chinese who have moved to Tibetan areas in recent years. The man said there have been many arrests and beatings of monks since March. He exclaimed, "Tibet is in a terrible situation! Tell people in America about this. Tell people in other countries about this, too!"

Kundeling Monastery

¶7. (C) On a different outing, walking through the winding streets of an ethnic Tibetan residential area about a mile west

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of the Potala Palace, ConGenOff came across the Kundeling Monastery. Striking up a conversation in Tibetan with one of the monks, a small crowd of monks soon gathered round. They said that their monastery currently has about 60 monks, with the youngest just eight years old. An older monk took ConGenOff aside into the monastery sanctuary, apparently to speak more frankly. He said that many monks in Lhasa had been detained since March, although he did not know if any of the monks of his monastery are currently under arrest, since some are outside the monastery and have been unable to keep in contact. The monks have been confined to Kundeling ever since the initial outbreak of violence on March 14, although one monk is allowed to go outside to buy food. The older monk said, "We love the Dalai Lama very much! Please don't tell 'the Chinese.'"

Han Monk from Shanghai

¶8. (C) According to an ethnic Han monk from Shanghai who has lived in Lhasa for the past five years and whom ConGenOff encountered in a downtown bookstore, ethnic Han monks have been treated far more "gently" than ethnic Tibetan monks. After March 14, he was simply told to register with the local police station. Ethnic Tibetans, on the other hand, had a much harder time of it. The ethnic Han monk could not speak Tibetan.

Beating of Detainees a Major Tibetan Grievance

¶9. (C) Repeated stories of beatings of monks under detention and the frequency with which this is mentioned by Tibetans suggest that abusive treatment of detainees is widespread, or at least is perceived to be so by many. It is possible that some in the government realize the issue to be a problem in attempting to diffuse ongoing ethnic tensions. ConGenOff saw a slogan on a police station on the way to the airport that read, "enforce the law in a 'civilized manner'" (wenming zhifa). However, the

absence of Tibetans from many local government positions makes it even more difficult for Han officials to understand the feelings of Tibetans. This in turn will likely continue to lead Han officials to rely on the counterproductive option of "strike hard."

BOUGHNER